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VIA AIR

DISPATCH 03-36-505

DATE 30 August 1956

TO: All Areas
FROM: Chief, KUCLOB
SUBJECT: General - Administrative
Specific - Fitness Reports
ACTION REQUESTED: Eternal Vigilance

The following discourse on fitness reports, which was prepared in another component of KUEARK, expresses in explicit language many of the legitimate criticisms on the manner in which fitness reports are prepared. I have the author's permission to use it. While I believe the caliber of our reports is improving, we are still subject to these same criticisms. The only way we can make these reports mean anything is for us to collectively exercise "eternal vigilance" and be conscientious in their preparation and review. I am circulating this memorandum to all supervisors at Headquarters and would like it to be distributed to all supervisors in your area:

a. For some time now I have been becoming more and more depressed by the pointlessness of our fitness reports. They are still so uniformly high as to have almost no meaning, and until we radically reform our practice they will continue to be a complete and enormous waste of time.

b. Some months ago, I had twenty-five reports picked at random and analyzed. Since the old forms were still in use, the raters had checked fifty items on each of twenty-five individuals, for a total of 1250. Of these 1250, 642 were above average and 351 were outstanding. Twenty-seven were "not observed," which leaves only 230 for the whole range of average and below average. Thus, when compared with one another, our people are all above average or better in more than eighty per cent of all traits observed. Now like the White Queen I can believe three impossible things before breakfast, at least most mornings, but this is asking too much. Seven of the twenty-five random sample employees are outstanding in from twenty-five to thirty-eight different ways. Not one of the twenty-five isn't outstanding in at least one respect, probably "security consciousness," since I notice that in that particular every single one of our people stands out above all his fellows.

/The whole system reminds you/

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The whole system reminds you of the island of Barataria, where the gondolier kings abandoned all effort to discriminate among varying degrees of merit:

The Noble Lord who rules the State
The Noble Lord who cleans the plate
The Noble Lord who scrubs the grate--
They all shall equal be!

The Lord High Bishop orthodox
The Lord High Coachman on the box
The Lord High Vagabond in the stocks--
They all shall equal be!

But you'll remember that the system broke down under the same weight of meaninglessness that makes nonsense of our fitness reports:

When you have nothing else to wear
But cloth of gold and satins rare,
For cloth of gold you cease to care--
Up goes the price of shoddy.

In short, whoever you may be,
To this conclusion you'll agree
When every one is somebodee,
Then no one's anybody!

c. I'd hoped that the new fitness report, Form 45, would help supervisors make more discriminating and meaningful judgments. And indeed the recent reports are a little better; at least, there are a few more ratings of average, though it is still true that almost no-one is ever below average in any respect whatever. They are still far too high; I have before me, for example, a fitness report on a secretary who is outstanding in twenty-two out of thirty traits, above average in seven, not observed in one. I have no doubt she is good, but is anyone that good? And they still contain internal contradictions, though it is true that the worst examples I can quote on that score are from the old forms:

1. Of a clerk stenographer it is said "In her desire to do her job well, she has, occasionally, an unfortunate manner verging on bossiness". Yet, on the same page the rater has marked "above average" in boxes which say "Gets along with people at all social levels, can get along with people, stimulating to associates, effective in discussions with associates, thoughtful of others, his criticism is constructive, able to influence others," etc.

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And in the box for "facilitates smooth operation of his office", he marked "outstanding"! The whole report is so tender-minded that when you see the rater has marked her way down to average on "unemotional, calm, even disposition," you take it that he really means far below average, and get a mental picture of a virago. It's all probably quite unfair to the girl.

2. Of an intelligence officer it is said at some length that he lacks forcefulness and self-assurance. But of the fifty traits checked immediately above, not one is lower than above average, including "can make decisions on his own, stimulating to his associates, able to influence others". Apparently the rater was as ruthless as he could force himself to be when he marked these traits in only the lowest degree of "above average".

d. Of course, I don't need to lecture the old hands about the futility of all this. But I'd like to remind everybody of the practical consequences:

1. We've had a good deal of discussion and correspondence about the need for filling a particular job overseas with a new man from outside the Station, because no one now present is good enough to take on the job. Surely, I can be forgiven for taking so long to agree with the Station that a new man is needed, when the principal candidate already on hand is officially judged to be outstanding in almost all the qualities the job requires, and above average in all others.

2. One man recently had his promotion held up for a couple of months because his fitness report showed him outstanding in forty-five of the fifty traits. His one puny weakness ("He displays a degree of impatientness due to his driving enthusiasm and determination to get on with the job") caused the rater to downgrade the other five traits (cautious in action, calm, able to do his job without strong support, implements decisions regardless of his own feelings, thoughtful of others") to merely the highest degree of above average. Since such a report is altogether incredible, and casts very strong doubt on the objectivity and judgment of the rater who recommended him for promotion, I personally held up the promotion in an attempt to find someone who could give me a more balanced and believable view. If that was unfair to the individual the blame rests with the rater, who has consistently made his subordinates look impossibly perfect.

3. You may remember that...

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3. You may remember that I have spent a good deal of time on various boards and panels set up to get rid of the few incompetent people and the rather more numerous marginal and mediocre people we all know to be in the Agency. After a couple of years of such efforts, we have managed to get rid of a few persons by means of the Chief, WIDARK's powers under public law, for reasons of unsatisfactory performance. In case after case, we found no justifiable grounds for action because of flattering fitness reports signed by the very supervisors who brought the cases to our attention for disposal.

e. In short, our fitness reporting is unfair to the outfit and to the individual and a calamitous waste of time. But it need not be if we:

1. Reverse the inflationary trend by using words to mean absolutely literally what they say.

2. Recognize that it is normal, rather than disgraceful, to be average, or below average, or even far below average, in this or that aspect of performance. The caliber of the people in this outfit is very high, so high that all-round good performance deserves no better mark than average, yet surely no one is not deficient somewhere. Anybody who wants to convince me that an employee is above average or better in every possible trait and every possible aspect of his work will have to prove it with a lot more persuasive evidence than a bunch of easy check marks and some glib pussyfooting language of the sort quoted in paragraphs 3 and 4 above.

3. Take special pains to write honest paragraphs. They will always be more meaningful than check marks or numbers, and will always receive more weight in any review of performance.

4. Crack down on all supervisors. They too are judged by the fitness reports they write. Your own fitness reports on supervisors under you should characterize candidly their performance as raters, with adverse comments on all who continue to value tender mindedness above hardheaded objectivity.

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Distribution: #3 - Headquarters
10 - Each Area

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